W. Allen McClelland, MMR, Honored

By Mike Brestel
MCR Trustee

The NMRA is honored and proud to present a Distinguished Service Award to W. Allen McClelland, MMR. McClelland was born in Cincinnati, in 1934, and moved at an early age to the Dayton, Ohio, area. He built his first layout in American Flyer S gauge in 1946, switched to HO in the mid-1950s and started building the Virginian & Ohio HO layout in the basement of his home in West Carrollton, Ohio, in 1961.

The world of model railroading in 1961 was very different from the one we know today, and in order to create the kind of model railroad he envisioned, McClelland was forced to innovate and pioneer in nearly every aspect of layout design and operation. In the process, he almost single-handedly reinvented the model railroading hobby, changing it into what we take for granted today. Some of the major concepts developed and promoted by McClelland over the last forty years include:

The "beyond the basement" concept, where staging tracks are used to simulate the connections of the modeled V&O with the rest of the North American rail network. This concept is key to modern layout design, where off-layout staging is usually regarded as a requirement.

The philosophy of "good enough" — constructing models that are built and detailed enough to fit in and be acceptable to the eye, but not so detailed that they require extra time and resources. This approach helps to ensure that a modeler can actually achieve lofty goals such as the construction of a large home layout, almost single-handed.

McClelland helped to move the concept of freelancing away from the "anything goes" approach of earlier times to the idea of "prototype freelancing," which borrows heavily from the prototype's example, thus adding plausibility and a sense of fitness to the world we create.

NMRA President Allen Pollock, right, and Executive Vice President John Roberts, left, present Allen McClelland with his distinguished Service Award.

The name of his railroad is a good example of this effort, at once establishing the locale of the railroad and sounding correct for the region. McClelland showed that even a mythical railroad can have a legitimate and highly developed history that contributes to its overall plausibility. Evidence ranges from a series of locomotive paint schemes to the remains of earlier structure foundations. McClelland focused on the transportation needs of the entire railroad rather than concentrating simply on local freights and their associated switching. Through freights thus assumed their rightful place in the daily operation of a complete transportation system. The V&O is an early yet fully up-to-date example of a linear, walk-around track plan. As such, it ensured that operators got the feeling of actually going somewhere and doing something as they accompanied their trains along the railroad.

MMR_0076 July 1965 pictured W. Allen McClelland

This photo shows W. Allen McClelland operating his HO gauge Virginian & Ohio Railroad with the walk-around Astrac control system. His scenery represents that terrain of Virginia.

"SCENERY THAT EVERYONE CAN DO" clinic presented by topographical master W. Allen McClelland holds audience spellbound.